

[I Wouldn't Exchange]

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Life History

TITLE: I WOULDN'T EXCHANGE.

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Name of Person Interviewed Mrs. Bess Long Wilburn (White)

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Occupation Teacher

Name of Writer Bess Long Wilburn

Name of Reviser Caldwell Sims, Union, S.C. At the quiet hour just "Just before dawn more than a half a century ago in the little village of Jonesville, South Carolina, a group of people sat tensely around a huge fireplace filled with brightly burning logs. The only sounds in the room were the singing of the tea kettle as it boiled there on the hearth and the occasional splatter of the fire as the logs rolled together. " The faces in the group wore an expression of expectancy and of waiting. A sound came from a figure lying on a big four poster bed in the corner of the shadow filled room. The An old [negro?] mammy arose from her place by the fire and turned up the wick of the kerosene lamp. One of the men, who was plainly the a kindly country doctor, went to the bedside while the younger man cleared his throat nervously, threw another log on the fire and went into an adjoining room , where three tousled headed C10- 1/31/41 - S.C.

little boys were fast asleep on a trundle bed. In the dim light of the night lamp his eyes rested on the chubby faces of his three little sons and his lips moved silently in prayer for the his beloved wife in the next room who was walking through the shadows that another life might be. “ A tiny wail, hurried movements and the voice of the doctor saying, ' Come Gid, and see the girl who has broken your team of boys ' . As the father leaped down to kiss the dark haired mother she asked, ' Do you mind that she isn't a boy? ' The father looked at his wee daughter and with a love filled voice lovingly replied, ' I wouldn't exchange her for the world . ' , [and?] that is how I, Mary Susan Elizabeth Gwynn Long, was born one January night to James Gideon Long and Susan Lourena Gwynn Long. “ When I was only a few months old my father, who had been elected Sheriff of Union County, moved his family to the town of Union in 1885. It was fitting that the people of his county honor him with the office as he had been tireless in his efforts to help his country . , in its hours of need. His father, John D. Long, a gifted and brilliant man, had been active in the building of the young county. He had also gone with his sons to the Virginia battle fields and fought there with them. Later his namesake and my father , Gideon , went to war. He was only fifteen years old when he marched away with Capt. D.A. Townsend and his company of “Sixteen Year Old Boys”. After the War Between The States, father returned to Jonesville and opened a mercantile business. Soon after he married Lou Gwynn, daughter of Jeptha and Susan Abell Gwynn of York. Their young married life was spent during the troublesome days of Reconstruction. When human endurance had reached its limit my 3 father was one of the very first to join that mysterious band of men known as "The Clan", who went out to help / make the South safe . for its beloved women. I have sat often at my father's knee and listened to the tales of the trying times. My mother, too, had a helping hand to lend. She with other good and brave women endured the hardships, encouraged their men, and sat up nights making robes for the riders . by night These two with their four children care to live in the Union County Jail when father's first term for Sheriff began. So [it?] was here that many trying times were encountered. I remember the awful night when my mother awoke and heard horses hoofs

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beating the night air. We heard them coming far off, then nearer, hundreds of them and then suddenly they had quite surrounded the jail. It was two o'clock in the morning, no one there to defend the prisoner but a lone man, his wife, and an expectant mother, and four little children. In those days there were no telephones in Union, so quite alone he stepped out on the porch and faced that mob of five hundred angry and determined men. He had only his gun so he spoke out to them, 'I know many of you and know you as my friends but the first one of you to set foot across those steps I'll shoot down.' " Away out in the crowd a man called out, 'Come on back boys, let's go. Gid will do just what he says'. ' So that is how father saved a man from being lynched. Later, when the negro was given a trial, he was proven innocent of the crime but he left here and went out West as there was still a feeling of prejudice against him. Many years later father was involved in trouble not of his making and he was sitting alone in his office unable to sleep, trying to read. It was half past two in the morning, [?] so he was very much surprised when someone tapped gently on the door of the office. He thought that it was my mother who had come to get him to go to bed so he said, 'Come in'. ' The door slowly opened and a black face looked in. Father recognized the man whom he had saved from the angry mob so many years before and so he said, 'I told you never to come back here: why have you?' He told father that he lived in Texas now where he had worked hard and saved over three hundred dollars. Some of his kin here had written him that father was in trouble so he had slipped back to offer father his savings! All he had in gratitude to the man who had saved his life! Father quickly explained that it was not a question of money, but something that had happened in the line of duty which he thought would come out all right. He sent the negro with his gift on back to Texas on an early morning train. Nobody ever knew of this but mother, until the day that my beloved father lay dying. A letter came then which mother opened. It was from that negro man who just could not keep from thinking about the good white man who had saved his life and who wished that the 'the best that could come to you, come'. I walked over and stood at my father's bedside. The setting sun sent its rays all around him and touched everything with its gold; as his life ebbed away I thought maybe the best that can come to man is when he has lived / worthily and can go out to meet the

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[great?] Adventure unafraid. “ The morning after the mob had been dispersed my father was unable to find the jail keys. This was a serious state of affairs as the inmates had to have food. Mother, thinking father might be overpowered by the mob, had hid the keys, but was unable to recall where, she had been so excited. Two days 5 later she suddenly remembered the hiding place. She had torn open one of the mattresses on the company bed and put them in it. Those keys were well hidden for there were two huge feather beds on top of the mattresses. “ I have tried to blot from my memory forget the hangings that took place. As nearly as she could mother shielded us from any knowledge of them, but we could see the hangman's rope being stretched out under the old wagon shed, the special meals of fried chicken and other good things my kind mother would have sent up to the condemned man. I remember the visits of the kin folks, the preacher coming, and once my father having a pool built upstairs in the prison to baptize a man who was going to be hanged. Many of my childhood memories are harrowing harrowing , but I wouldn't wouldn't exchange them. “ Another girl had come to our house to stay, my sister, Sarah Louise Long, there were now five of us. My brothers, James Gideon Long, Jr., Abel Gwynn Long and John Arthur Long were old enough to go to school. In those days public schools in Union were unsatisfactory because the teachers in them did not get regular pay and so the people who taught there were not the best. My brothers went to the private school known as The Male Academy. Graduates from the best colleges such as Harvard and Yale taught here. There was also a good private school for girls, Clifford Female Seminary. When I was old enough to attend school I went to the latter. After rains Main Street in Union was knee deep in mud. As I lived more than a mile from the school , I rode. I went in state, in an old fashioned phaeton , with a gentle horse and an old driver, a kind old darky who was always at my disposal. It mattered not to me 6 that my driver was a United States prisoner serving a long prison term. In those days there were no chain gangs and often prisoners were sentenced to the county jail to work. “ Clifford Seminary, the name has had a real charm for me. It was truly a place in which to live and love and learn. Not a school in terms of laborious lessons, tiresome tasks and long hard hours. It was a real school home to be happy in, learning about beautiful and interesting things. Here I learned

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about art and music and books. Under the guidance of my beloved teachers, Dr. and Mrs. B.G. Clifford and Miss Susie Scofield, I spent many happy days of my childhood were spent days studying , in the class rooms, painting , in the studio, reading , in the library, helping Miss usie Susie tend the canary birds and squirrels , or just playing under the rose arbor and in the beautiful flower garden. And now after nearly fifty years I am told that the same method of learning I knew then [-?] is new! Only this past summer I had the pleasure of observing in the schools of the Parker District in Greenville, S.C., where the learn-by-doing method is used, and as I watched the happy children living and loving and learning my eyes grew misty with my own childhood memories . , that I wouldn't exchange. Then “ [before?] I knew it, I was grown up! Graduation Day came. Flowers and friends and finery. Commencement was a gala affair. There were plans and parties and dresses to be fitted. One for the / Baccalaureate sermon one for the concert, one for the reception and one for graduation! The last to be was the loveliest of all with lacey ruffles and satiny streamers. It was almost like getting your trousseau ready, and the dress makers in town were kept busy. 7 “ There were girl friends to be invited for commencement week. Your My favorite aunt for whom you were I was named came ; boy cousins to keep your my girl friends entertained . and if you were fortunate enough to have a grandmother , she came too. Such a good time everybody flirting and frolicking. The night of my graduation arrived. There were three of us who had started to school together and grown up together. I thought we looked very lovely. Our dresses had yards and yards of misty white organdie, sewed all over with dainty laces and white satin ribbons. I think Mamie's sash was wider than mine but my pompadour was higher than anybody else's. It was the day of the pompadour and to be stylish one had to pile and pile your her hair in a towering mass on top of your her head. “ I remember what my favorite uncle said to me when he came up to congratulate me. ' Bess, if you have half as much on the inside of your head as you have on the outside, you'll surely make your mark in the world ' . I almost wished it had been / my favorite aunt who had come, she wouldn't have said that. “ After graduation there / was a summer of fun. The only serious moment I remember was when we were requested by Mrs. Clifford to take the teachers' examination being given that summer. The three of

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us received first grade certificates. I did not know that mine would be put to use so soon. About this time my father suffered financial losses. My 8 sister younger than I needed to complete her education, / so I asked my parents to let me teach. In those days that was the only work a young lady could do outside her home. I want to be perfectly honest about entering the teaching profession. I cannot say that I was fired with the desire to help the young build character. Frankly, I didn't know what it was all about. I just wanted to help my beloved mother and father when they needed aid. " The first school offered me was not far from the home of a schoolmate of mine. Located in an isolated district, the school was two and a half miles away. I had to walk the distance alone as nearly all the patrons lived on the other side of the school. The pupils numbered about ten or twelve almost grown boys and girls and about the same number of small children.[?] " The school house was a very an old log house with cracks in it that a rabbit could squeeze thru. Sometimes when the [?] door was shut a child's little dog would come whining thru. There were two windows with wooden shutters and at one end a big fireplace made of mud and stones. We did not bother to cut wood; we just threw on a whole stick. I didn't like that school. I had never seen a place like it and I was afraid of the big boys and girls. They knew so much more than I. They could work the most marvelous sums all over the front and back of their slates. I never liked arithmetic anyway. But I loved those little children and we had good times together when we could slip off to one side of the school yard from the big 9 boys and girls. There was something else that I liked at Piney Grove. My walk to school went thru a magnificent grove of pine trees. I would almost run to get to them. They stood tall and still. As I walked on the thick [?] carpet of fallen needles, looked looking up thru the columns with the rays of the morning sun slanting thru them, and listened listening to the murmur of the wind in their branches, I felt as if I were in a great cathedral and my heart would sing a morning hymn. I believe I am a better woman for having known those trees. Then I would pass on out of the woods with a song in my heart. #" I had a gun in my pocket which my father insisted I carry in case I met a mad dog. I was just about as much afraid of the gun as I would have been of a mad dog. " I stayed two sessions. The salary was small, only twenty-five dollar a month. Board cost twelve and one half dollars a month.

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The money that was left I use for my personal wants. I don't know what I did for those children but I know what they did for me. There and then I resolved that if trying to be a good teacher and really being one could help people like those at Piney Grove, I would dedicate myself to the profession. a friend who was teaching at Cross Keys gave up the position to move with her family to a distant state. Before leaving she recommended me to the trustees. The school was offered to me and I accepted. That was thirty-three years ago.

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The road to Cross Keys was a long winding one and the mud was up to the carriage wheels. The journey lasted from early morning to the setting of the sun. Awaiting me there was till sunset. love and life and I wouldn't exchange. One January morning long ago I stood on the knoll in front of the Key House and looked down the long drive way with its great gnarled walnut / trees flanking each side. The whole world was aglisten with the morning sun shining on the frost that had falled in the night. I walked down the Walnut Lane past a friendly country store, followed a zigzag rail fence that seemed to be uncertain as to where it should end. I came to a little white school house that opened its arms and took me in. It has held me ever since. “ The environment in my new school was better than in my former one, and so was the salary, which was thirty-five dollar a month . with [board?] cost / [?] ten dollars . the balance went for personal desires. What I paid for my board was out of keeping with the laden table I sat down to, a large old-fashioned double-deck affair. The part of the table that held the service was of course stationary, while the part that held the food would spin around . in a neat convenient way for [?] “ While the Cross Keys / School had only one room, it was the custom of those in charge to provide it with cultured and capable teachers. Here I found ambitious children whose parents encouraged them to prepare for high school in nearby towns. Nearly all the pupils had older brothers and sisters away in / College. 11 “ Most of the families owned their own homes and lived well and comfortably, which made for a pleasant social atmosphere. Many of the social activities [?] centered around old Padgett's Creek / Church that had

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been sheltering and tending the people for one hundred and fifty years. Its [?] churchyard was the meeting place of the [?] of these kindly people. They met each Sunday to worship under the guidance of the old pastor who had led them for over forty years. After the services there would be a visiting together there in the church and on the grounds. Friends and kinfolks asking about each other's health and exchanging bits of news. Then you were invited to go home with some one for dinner. It was very nice and friendly. On Sunday afternoons the beaus of the place would take the young ladies to drive. That was before the day of the automobile so every young man tried to have a stylish turnout. A high narrow buggy and fast stepping horses were the height of fashion. " My first Sunday afternoon in Cross Keys was claimed by the young son in the home where I was boarding. As we drove over the pretty country roads and lanes the young man pointed out the Key House, his mother's old home, and asked me how I would like to live there. It was lovely. So I said, "Why anyone would like that lovely old place". He replied, "I'm glad to hear that because I expect you'll live there". It struck me that the young man in the country lost no time but I accepted the remark as a joke. It turned out to be a prophesy, however, for thirty-three years later I'm still here in the old Key House made dear to me with its own associations with other days and with my own memories. 12 #"

Besides Sunday visitors, other social activities my first winter in Cross Keys were Tuesday night choir practice, Wednesday night prayer meeting and the gay parties the young folks had on Saturday night. ometimes Sometimes the party would be a square dance, sometimes a pound party, or a candy-pulling. In summer we enjoyed picnics, strawrides or watermelon slicing. All of it was good wholesome fun. The people of Cross Keys have always taken their politics seriously, so much ado is made over their campaign meetings and barbecues. My first winter there passed very pleasantly. I was busy and happy in my school duties and had been asked to accept again. " In the spring I was married to William / Claude Wilburn, son of Barney and Mary Whitmire Wilburn. The people whom I had come among and learned to love had in return loved me, so they seemed glad that ' Miss Bess ' was really one of them and would stay on with them We lived with my husband's people. He was the overseer of his father's plantation which required a large force of negro hands. I stayed

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busy with my school duties till in the spring of 1907 I went home to await the coming of our son. William Claude Wilburn, Jr. was born on Easter Sunday Morning. " Later we started housekeeping for ourselves at the old Gregory Place. I loved it there; the wind-swept hill, the friendly old house with its big open fireplace, the old apple trees sifting their snowy petals down on the tender green grass, old ' Aunt ' Lissa at the wash place under the cedars, with her white clothes flapping on the line. Claude out in the freshly plowed fields and our little son playing under the big oak trees with his dog 13 and white rabbits. The white pigeons flying around the cote with wings glistening in the sun like streaks of silver. I was happy on the hill, baking and brewing and making ahome a home. When my son was four or five years old I went back to the school room and he with me. From this point I really date my teaching career. Heretofore teaching was merely a mechanical process but now it was quite different. I not only taught with heart and mind but I put some of my soul into it. [?] Each day was a new day to do something fine in, something different in, something to make a child happy. " That was a long time ago. The little boy who trotted along by my side is a man grown, doing a man's work, but his mother still walks that road facing each day with high resolve hoping to help some child find his place. Two other little [sets?] of fingers have held on to mine down that road, two little girls whose mothers God called died home have shared my heart and home . I pray God that I have not [?] found wanting. If I have some measure of success in my profession not all the credit is due to me. I have tried to be the best teach teacher that I could be . I've kept abreast of the times . I've read good books and had professional training when I could get it , and bought professional books. ' The best gift is part of the giver ' . If that is be true I have made my people here in Cross Keys a true gift, becaus because part of myself is truly given to my work. [???

" In return they have given me love and confidence and without either I could not have gone on and on . with high courage and brave heart. They have made it easy for me. Thru the years I have shared with them, their joys and their sorrows. I have taught the children of children I taught.

This year I am [?] teaching the lovely little granddaughter of a former pupil . and when she slips her little arms around my neck to kiss me good bye I think how good God has been. Three generations kissing me good bye in the same school room! Yes , I have been a most fortunate woman. “ Together we have had sorrowful days - / When Sarah Ella Stevens tried to make her little death-chilled fingers write her name as she lay gasping for breath ; / The day Ray Stevens who had gone so was dying far (into that Happy Land) called back, ' Miss Bess, I see Grandma, I'll tell her I made my grade ' . As the tired little heart stopped I looked down at a grief stricken father kneeling by his eldest son's death bed and thought of the mother lying so desperately ill back home. I had been the father's teacher, the son's teacher, who also could share their grief so fittingly. “ Sometimes I'm called upon to share their groubles troubles of other kinds. There was the time I went to the death house and saved poor underprivileged Roy from electrocution. The Governor listened to my plea and spared his life. To-day Roy walks among his friends a free man. The path we've trod together isn't always rough. It runs thru pleasant places often. Sometimes it's a young friend who is going to be married and needs helpful advice or a young man who is going out to seek his fortune, a little old lady who needs a steady hand to guide her faltering steps, a young mother who wants a glad hand to welcome the new baby, or a little child that needs to be led. Or just a companion who needs a word of encouragement. Always I give of myself and so - A star had risen in my heart To light a path 15 A star has risen in my heart To light a path to God. It is of his being a part, To guide the way where saints have trod. Its rays shine out and all about On footsteps weary and slow On happy feet of children sweet As Heavenly they onward go. Dear God may my start / shine on Showing me the way afar, Till at last I come with tasks well done To his gates standing ajar. “ I have seen the Cross Keys School grow from a one-teacher school to three. The salaries of the teacher have increase increased from thrity-five to one hundred dollars . though the building has been enlarged it is still old and inadequate. I never allowed the condition of the building or the small salary to affect my teaching and interest. I tried harder to make the place more attractive and comfortable. Last year the

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trustees, the superintendent and the government planned a new building for the Cross Keys School. I watched the tearing down of the old school house with mixed emotions. It held many memories for me. My people and I had loved and learned and lived in it. While the new building was under construction we went up the wind swept hill where I first kept house. I watched the children running in and out of my old home and my thoughts went back to the days when my 16 little son played there with his dogs and white rabbits. Sometimes I'd see a streak of silver across the sky and I would think it was the flash of a pigeon's wing, but the pigeons are long since gone and the streak of silver I saw was only the sunlight on the wings of an airplane high over my old home.

We have moved into our new school house. It is a modern brick building, warm and comfortable, equipped with modern fixtures. In the basement there is a beautiful [?] dining room where hot lunch is served each day. A school bus transports the pupils to and from school. I see happy children filling the halls and passing on into the airy school rooms where everything is done to make them happy and useful. I see an efficient and helpful supervisor coming in to bring us new ideas and encourage us. I see happy children with their teachers go down to dinner, then out to a modern playground, and I think, at last I have, reached my goal. " But have I? I think not.

To-morrow when I walk out the door of the old Key House, still my [?] home, stand on the knoll and look up the road thru the old Walnut Lane, there I'll see many changes. Only three or four of the old trees are left. They had to give way for the fine new high-way. The old chestnut rail fence just wandered off long ago, the country store has had its face lifted and is trimmed all over with electric doo-dads, now a modern hussy with painted face.

The little white schoolhouse is gone and handsome new brick building stands with proud insolence just as if it had always been there, but I know better. I remember a little white one that opened its arms to me, a young girl, thrity-three years and took [?] me to its heart. To-morrow I shall walk up the road, open my arms to that new 17 school house, so young

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and inexperienced, take it to my heart, and help make it the best place in the [?] best place in the world in which to live and love and learn.

And I wouldn't exchange.